

Interview with Alberto M. Piedra

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR ALBERTO M. PIEDRA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: September 26, 1991

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Ambassador Piedra]

Q: Today is September 26, 1991. This is an interview with Ambassador Alberto M. Piedra concerning his work with the Department of State. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you would give me a little about your background? Where did you come from, where were you educated, etc.?

PIEDRA: I was born in Havana, Cuba but brought up primarily in Europe. I went to private schools in England for three years when I was a little boy.

Q: When were you born?

PIEDRA: I was born in 1926. I was sent off to British schools at the age of eight in 1934 and I stayed in England at St. Edmonds College for three years and from there I was sent to Switzerland to study French and continue my studies. I stayed there two years until the war broke out. When the war broke out we came back to America just prior to the Germans coming into France. In New York I stayed for another two years at Royolla high school on Park Avenue and from there went back to Havana. There I finished my high

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school and then went to the university where I got my law degree. That was in 1948. After graduating I decided to study in Europe so I went to the University of Madrid for almost two years.

Q: What were you studying there?

PIEDRA: I was studying what they call in Europe political economy which is a mixture of political science and economics. Then I returned to Havana in 1951 and decided to get a Ph.D. in the United States because I always thought it would be better for me living in America to have a degree from the United States even though I had a degree from Europe. So I decided to go to Georgetown.

Q: This interview is taking place at Georgetown University.

PIEDRA: I started my studies in 1952 and proceeded towards my Ph.D. but it was interrupted in 1959 because of the Cuban revolution. In fact I went back in May, 1958 and the revolution came and Fidel Castro, among others, asked me whether I would join the government. Even though I was never a fan of Fidel Castro's I knew him from school.

Q: I was going to ask where...

PIEDRA: I knew him from the university. It was not a very close relationship but he had been to my home several times. When Batista fell and Castro came to Havana, etc., they called me one day and asked me if I would like to join the government. I had grave doubts about it for several reasons, but I was approached by many friends. Being a moderate, myself, the idea at that time was that it was better for you to occupy a position because otherwise if you don't maybe some radical person would take the position and it was better for you to do it.

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To make a long story short, I did join the government around the 16th or 17th of January. I was director general of exports and imports. This would be more or less equivalent to the assistant secretary in the Department of Commerce—possibly under secretary.

Q: For a country like Cuba exports and imports would be extremely important.

PIEDRA: I had about 300 employees there. I stayed there until May at which time I began to see all sorts of things that were not in accordance with my own criteria of how things should be. In terms of hiring and firing of people it was done in a way I did not agree with at all. So, I decided to quit. So I went to the Minister, and told him...one was always careful for at that time you already had the beginnings of the symptoms of a dictatorial regime...I was afraid a little bit in terms of my family and myself, that they would not let me get out. So what I did was to tell him that I had not finished my degree at Georgetown, still had the dissertation to do, and felt it would be better for me to return to the United States, finish my degree, get my Ph.D., etc., and then return to Cuba and be more helpful and of greater service to the revolution. He accepted this. Whether he believed it or not, I don't know.

So I left for Washington. I stayed here and visited New York, Boston, etc. And then I got so many letters from Havana telling me that I was wrong, that I should continue in Havana, that it wasn't as bad as I thought it was, that it was just a Cuban reform movement, that I should return. I had my grave doubts again, but nevertheless my wife was expecting my third child and of course she wanted me to go back to Havana. She wanted at that time to have the child in Cuba. So I went back to Havana.

I did not go back to the government, but I went back to the University where I was teaching. I stayed there about three months and in September I told my wife now is the time to leave for good. No matter what they tell me I think I am right, I honestly believe that they are wrong, that this is going towards some communist dictatorial regime so I think we ought to leave.

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So, in September I left. I came back to Washington and started looking for a job. My wife did not leave because the baby was born in June and she wanted to wait a few months so she didn't leave until about December. In the meantime I got a job at the OAS, Organization of American States. That is how I began my professional career in the States. Finally my wife joined me in December and we have stayed in Washington ever since. We have lived in Washington since 1959.

Q: I take it that you were not part of the Cuban exile community that developed particularly around Miami?

PIEDRA: No, I was not. As you can well imagine I knew many of the people who afterwards left Cuba and I maintain fairly close contact with some of them in Miami. But I have never been part of that community in the sense that we have been in Washington and they have been in Miami.

Q: The reason I mention this is for someone looking at this in the future, this group, as often an emigre group does, is much concerned with Cuba, internal politics and also the emigre politics within an area.

PIEDRA: We were concerned with internal politics in Cuba because after all it was the country we were born in. But I was not directly involved in any internal politics that took place in Miami.

Q: I wonder if you would talk a little about your time on the OAS staff. You were there from 1960-62 and would return 20 years later. How did you see the OAS operating in the early 60s, the time when the Alliance of Progress was just getting started and all that? And America's role in the OAS, was there a change when you got into it later on?

PIEDRA: Well, obviously you have to realize that I was at an entirely different level when I was at the OAS the first time so therefore my approach was slightly different.

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Now I think and have always maintained that the OAS has a role to play...it played it in the past and I think it can play it in the future.

When I was there the first time I think the OAS was much more involved in economic matters. It was also involved in political matters, obviously, but I think greater stress was placed on economic aspects. Maybe the reason for this was that at that time the Inter-American Development Bank was just beginning, as you know. It was in its very initial stages. As the Bank developed it took over many of the economic functions of the OAS. Therefore that particular role of the OAS has definitely declined, in my opinion. I may be wrong. That does not mean that the OAS does not have a role to play, but I don't think it is as significant as it was before.

Nevertheless, from a political point of view, on a regional basis, I think it has solved problems. I think it has solved problems, maybe of what you might call on a global level of a minor importance, but from the point of view of the area, it has played a significant role in the Honduran and Salvadoran conflict as well as other territorial conflicts. So from that point of view it did play a role, it is still playing a role and I think it can continue from our point of view to play a role.

Q: Between 1960-62 and 1982 you left the OAS and before you came back to the OAS as the number two person in the US Delegation, what were you doing?

PIEDRA: I left the OAS in 1962 and was approached by Catholic University and offered a professorship in the area of the development in Latin American affairs. I have always liked teaching. Perhaps that is one of my weak spots. I accepted it and left the OAS and went into teaching where I remained for all those years. Although I was always in contact with international affairs through international organizations, congressmen, the World Bank, etc. So I was always very interested in world affairs and in a very special way, obviously, in Latin American affairs.

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Q: How did your appointment to be the number two person in the US Delegation to the OAS come about? You served there from 1982-84.

PIEDRA: In all honestly it is difficult to tell. I guess it came about because I had contacts in the Senate and Congress. I suppose they needed somebody in Latin American affairs and in a very special way I also knew Ambassador Middendorf.

Q: Who was the chief of the delegation.

PIEDRA: Apparently they talked to Ambassador Middendorf and they said he needed somebody who would be a specialist in Latin American affairs. He called me one day and said, "Alberto I would like you to become my second at the OAS." I thought about it and since I am very much interested in the area I said, "Yes." When I mentioned before that one of my weak spots is teaching, I have to be frank and say that diplomacy has always attracted me, not politics. One must make the distinction. Diplomacy has always attracted me. I like dealing with people. I am very socially inclined. Getting involved with persons...I have always enjoyed that.

And let me add that we did maintain through all these years very close contacts with the different Latin American embassies, so we had close contacts with ambassadors, etc.

This is the early Reagan Administration which had been taking a jaundiced look at the United Nations, etc. Did this carry over in its attitude towards the Organization American States?

PIEDRA: I do believe for many problems, especially in the region areas it was easier for the United States to get backing within the OAS than a global institution like the United Nations where at that time there were the Soviet bloc countries, third world blocs, etc. which would for various reasons often vote against the United States. So for us it was easier to get the results we wanted by operating within a regional organization.

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Q: So it wasn't quite the same attitude as it was towards the United Nations—almost an attitude of disdain?

PIEDRA: No, no, I definitely would not say that. It is not a question of disdain. It is a question maybe of tactics if you wish, but it would be easier in many ways, I suppose, when a regional issue came up to get support within the hemisphere then it would be to go to the United Nations when you knew beforehand that you were going to get the opposition of x number of votes. Here, within our region, there was a greater possibility of us being able....

Q: You could work with the situation.

PIEDRA: I do want to clarify it doesn't mean disdain. Not at all.

Q: No, I was talking about disdain more for the United Nations.

PIEDRA: I wouldn't call it disdain, I would call it for tactical reasons it was easier for us to get the results... Let's be very frank about this. Let's put the case of Cuba. Any issue involving Cuba would be much more difficult at that time, today things have changed, to get the support of whatever members of the UN than it would be of the OAS.

Q: Were there any issues that occupied this two year periods? What were they?

PIEDRA: The Malvinas issue. The Falkland islands.

Q: Could you explain what it was and what was the American role?

PIEDRA: We were in this particular incidence divided between our allegiance towards Latin America...most Latin American countries took the side of the Argentine...and on the other hand we also had our allegiances towards Britain for obvious reasons that we don't

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have to go into, plus the fact that it was an invasion. It was a territorial invasion of an area of the world that was under the British flag and they used military force and power to do it.

Q: And a pretty odious government at that time in Argentina.

PIEDRA: That's right. These factors made it difficult for us in the sense we wanted to be on the side of Latin America but on the other hand we realized that in these particular circumstances it was very difficult to take a position that would please our Latin American neighbors in the South. And then we could not accept a violation of international law which in reality it was.

Q: It was pretty obvious that if we were to deal on a world basis we couldn't accept this invasion, but you have all sorts of Latin pride involved, etc. How did you deal with this in the OAS?

PIEDRA: One of the issues which was raised many, many times that concerned me particularly was the reaction that the Latin Americans would have towards the United States if we took the position of anti the Argentine. That concerned me very much because I was worried that our actions in "favor" of Britain, for example, would boomerang against us possibly in the long run because it would leave a trace of...at the time when the chips were down you didn't back us you backed them. That was the conflict that arose. I mentioned it many times. It was a difficult decision and I am sure that those at the highest levels in government were concerned about this. On the one hand we did not want to antagonize the Latin American countries, on the other hand Britain was involved and there was an invasion. So it was not an easy thing for us to do.

General Haig, Secretary of State at that time, did try by all means to work out an agreement.

Q: There was shuttle diplomacy which probably was the longest shuttle one can imagine—between Washington, London and Buenos Aires.

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PIEDRA: Yes, I remember. I was involved in that here in the Washington area. But unfortunately, Galtieri was so stubborn.

Q: He was the head of the junta in Buenos Aires.

PIEDRA: He was so stubborn that until the very last moment when he was offered all possibilities of an honorable retreat he didn't accept it. From that point of view I think he was extremely foolish and stupid. Until the very last moment I think an agreement could have been reached. We tried, I really mean it. I know this is true. We tried every which way to do so.

Q: Obviously the sympathies in the United States ran with the British, do you think within the OAS, with your work and Ambassador Middendorf's work and all that there was understanding of the complexities and problems for the United States?

PIEDRA: I think there was an understanding. I think here again the same thing we had the problem with Britain on the one hand and the invasion of the Falkland Islands on the other, they also experienced on the one hand they realized that there was something wrong here, the way it was done. I would tend to say that they would sympathize for the Falklands to be returned to the Argentine. They had a sense of loyalty towards the Argentine. But on the other hand there were two problems: First, the way it was done and secondly, they did not sympathize with Galtieri. So this was the clash that existed. However, as they demonstrated by their vote they did solidify themselves with the Argentine. I think there was the sense of loyalty in Latin America of "let's all be together," etc. And, of course, this was used by the more leftist governments in Latin America to accuse the United States of all sorts of imperialism, involvement in internal affairs of the region, etc.

Q: Was it your impression from the OAS that it wasn't a long lasting poison?

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PIEDRA: No. I have to admit and I admitted openly that I think I over rated the reactions that would come in the future. I thought the reaction would stay there and on the basis of conversations that I had I honestly thought that there would be much more hard feelings. But I would agree with what you said now. It seems to be long forgotten...I don't think anyone remembers. To be honest with you, I think from that point of view that I over rated the possibility of the negative reaction in the future.

Q: Well I think that we in the diplomatic trade have to look at a worse case scenario anyway. One has to say that there is a real potential of a problem.

PIEDRA: Especially when you talk with some of the people you dealt with who were directly involved. I think the long run effect of all this, unless something comes up in the future that we are unaware of, are very mild.

Q: In 1984 you were nominated to be Ambassador to Guatemala. How did this appointment come about?

PIEDRA: The person who sponsored me was Jesse Helms. I hardly knew him personally, but I knew some of the people who worked for him. I knew some of the people who had been in contact with Senator Helms. Plus the fact that I was a good friend of Ambassador Middendorf who also had at that time a good deal of influence in the government. I was also a good friend of Jeane Kirkpatrick who had a lot of influence. I was a good friend of many people in the government at the time that backed me. So it was a combination of Congress plus the State Department who basically supported me.

Q: You were already inside the system by being in the OAS.

PIEDRA: Correct. When I started in the OAS Tom Enders was the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs and he knew me also. Then came Tony Martinez who saw how I operated at the State Department and he did not object. I don't know if I was his prime candidate, probably not because he told me personally afterwards, "Alberto you have my

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total support now that you have been appointed Ambassador.” And I did get his support. I don't think there was any major opposition. Senators Dodd and Pell backed me without any problems.

Q: These were Senators on the Foreign Relations Committee.

PIEDRA: I had absolutely no problem with the Foreign Relations Committee. It was unanimous.

Q: I wonder if you could explain a little about Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina because he plays a fairly strong role in our Latin American policy at that time? Not only Senator Helms but as you mentioned you knew some of his staff members. It was almost as if Senator Helms had, and maybe still has, his own sort of Central American foreign policy. He feels very strongly about this although he doesn't come from a particularly Spanish-oriented state.

PIEDRA: He did have his own staff which was interested in Latin America, but I don't think this was true of only Senator Helms. Afterwards I operated with other Senators as well. For example, Senator Dodd from Connecticut became a very good friend of mine and came several times to Guatemala and stayed with me. He also had a staff that was very interested in Latin America at that time. The other Senator who came very often was Kerry from Massachusetts. In fact, when I left Guatemala, which is ironic, I came in with the most conservative, if you want to use the term, in the Senate and I left with the compliments of one of the most liberal in the Senate which are Senators Dodd and Kerry. In fact, Senator Kerry had inserted into the Congressional Record three or four pages in which he quotes from the Foreign Minister of Guatemala and his own personal experience in Guatemala saying that I was one of the best ambassadors he had ever known. So I am very proud, I have to admit it. On the one hand, Senator Helms was instrumental in my getting the position and on the other hand when I left the greatest compliment given to me was one by Senator Kerry.

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Q: Going step by step, when you went to Guatemala, how were you prepared by the State Department?

PIEDRA: They have what they call an Ambassadorial Seminar which I think was a three-day affair.

Q: So it wasn't a very extensive course?

PIEDRA: No. But it was useful. But, of course, in my case the usual questions of security, how to handle one self for security purposes, etc....part of it was the process of adaptation. I, being of Latin background, the process of adaptation was very little or nothing. So there was really no problem. We adapted almost the very instant we arrived. On the other hand, the other part of it was interesting. The entire Ambassadorial Seminar, I think, is extremely interesting. I think Tony Martinez gives them now.

Q: He does, I have interviewed him.

PIEDRA: I do want to mention that Tony Martinez during my stay in Guatemala was totally supportive of our actions there. We had no problems.

Q: Before we get to the situation in Guatemala, what was your impression of the Embassy's staffing and its effectiveness when you were there?

PIEDRA: I have no complaints about the Embassy in Guatemala at all. From the day I arrived I found support, people who were friendly. I found no antagonism even though there is always the danger of it being a political appointee and having been appointed by Senator Helms.

Q: Particularly in the Foreign Service there was the impression that Senator Helms and the people he would appoint would be ideologues who would go in with a fairly extreme rightist point of view.

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PIEDRA: That is correct. That is why, I said it before, that I am proud in many ways to say that when I left Guatemala the persons who gave me the greatest compliment was Senator Kerry from Massachusetts and Senator Dodd.

Q: What were American interests in Guatemala when you arrived and during the time you were there?

PIEDRA: As you know there was a military government in Guatemala when I arrived. You ask me what were the main objectives? Primarily I would say to reestablish free elections in a democratic process in Guatemala. Establish respect for human rights in Guatemala was another priority. Unfortunately it is true that there have been many violations of human rights in Guatemala. I mean that is a fact of life.

Q: Could you describe how we defined human rights and what were our concerns about human rights?

PIEDRA: Violation, for example, in this particular case in Guatemala of freedom, not only the freedom of expression which is one of the basic things, but freedom to be able to move around. To be able to participate in a democratic government with free elections. To respect your neighbor and his property. All of these things which were not the norm in Guatemala.

Q: There were kidnappings, killings, etc.

PIEDRA: Yes. And what the tragedy of Guatemala was, and that happened very often in Central American unfortunately, was that you never knew who did it. There is no doubt that in Guatemala violations were committed from both sides. It is not a question of only the government committed all sorts of violations, and the army in many ways, but the other side was also responsible for violations. So it was a very complicated thing. It is true that the army very often from what we heard committed all sorts of wrong doings.

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I do want to clarify one thing which I think should be clarified. When I arrived in Guatemala the situation had improved already. Under the regime of Vitor the situation began to improve. I honestly believe that during my stay in Guatemala that the whole situation of human rights improved very significantly. I am not trying to get credit for it...circumstances or whatever you want...but it was a fact of life.

Q: But the United States through its Ambassador was putting tremendous pressure on Guatemala. So we had democracy, human rights and...

PIEDRA: Development. As you know you can not have development if you don't have stability. So therefore in order for you to have development the first thing you must have is stability politically and otherwise because otherwise you cannot invest, you cannot do anything. Our basic idea was to try to set the scenario so that development could take place...investment could return to Guatemala. For example, in Guatemala the flight of capital was horrendous. Many of the wealthy were taking the money out and putting it in Miami, etc. Why were they doing this? There were many factors. Maybe some people were doing it because of greed, others were doing it for other reasons. But there was no doubt that many people honestly did it because they felt unsafe in Guatemala. So therefore they thought it was better for them to have their money out. Therefore, if you want all that money back, the first thing you have to do is get stability in the country. If you don't have that stability it is very difficult to convince anybody to put their money there. I think this is one of the main reason apart from the human aspects of it that we were so much interested in getting political stability in the country and at the same time improve the human rights situation, possibly eliminate completely all violations, and try to convince people that Guatemala had the human and material resources to be developed.

Q: One of the stories is that our main concern in Central America is promoting American business exploitive relationships. You think of the American Fruit Company and all that. I wonder if you could talk about our commercial interests in the region.

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PIEDRA: Obviously we do have commercial interests, but I honestly think that we cannot talk about the exploitation of American business in Latin America today. You may have talked about these things 30 or 40 years ago. I am not denying that big companies did some things that were probably not correct ones. I don't want to get involved in that because that is something of the past. We ought to talk about the bad things but we never talk about the good things that they left in terms of communications and so forth. I don't want to get involved in that.

But to talk about exploitation right now in Guatemala specifically, I don't think that is correct.

Q: Just to get a feel for this, as American Ambassador, American commercial development outside of doing it for development purposes, I mean, really didn't even cross your radar practically. Did it? To help American business wasn't a major priority.

PIEDRA: We did try to foster foreign investments and American in general because it would help the economy.

Q: The thrust of the Ambassador was to develop the economy of the country...

PIEDRA: To try to help them develop. It is not our role to develop the economy of Guatemala. Our role is to try to help them. To try to make it easier for them to develop themselves. AID and foreign aid was given to try to help them to develop...give them the technology and knowhow. They do need assistance. Very often they do not have the knowhow and knowledge. From that point of view AID did a very good job while I was there.

Q: I wonder if you could give a little idea of what the situation, political and economic, was internally in Guatemala when you arrived there in 1984?

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PIEDRA: I honestly believe that there was a very significant improvement, even from the political point of view and I will tell you why. I honestly believe that Vitor really wanted the country to go back to democracy. If he had not wanted it, he could have avoided it at that time.

Q: How long had he been in power?

PIEDRA: Not very long.

Q: But there had been a military...

PIEDRA: Remember he took over from another general.

Q: So we are talking about a succession of military governments for some time and you came when there was a very significant change.

PIEDRA: That's right. I talked to him many, many times. In fact, when I left the country he was no longer president, having been replaced by a Christian Democrat who was freely elected. I took the time to go to his home...he lived in a small apartment in Guatemala...I wanted to go and say goodbye and thank him for being instrumental in bringing back democracy. I really believe that in spite of other faults he may have had he really believed that the country had to go back to some type of democracy. And he should be given credit.

Q: The election was when?

PIEDRA: It must have been in November, 1983.

Q: You were there.

PIEDRA: Yes. He took office in December, one month later.

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Q: Had the United States played any role by offering more aid, etc. in exchange for democracy?

PIEDRA: No, we didn't make any conditions at all as far as I can remember. I never said, "either you do it or else." We just told them point blank that if a coup or junta took place we would take it very negatively. We showed strongly our interests in democracy and human rights and it was obvious to them, but it was not specific with strings attached.

Q: You mention in human rights that it came through kidnappings, killings, threats and terrorists were coming from the right, left and all, but who was on the right and who was on the left?

PIEDRA: It was very difficult to tell. You see they had four revolutionary movements so you could tell more or less, but not specifically who were their representatives let's say in Guatemala City. For example, I used to go to Guatemala quite a lot before I became Ambassador. I remember one day in Guatemala City — Guatemala City was a dead city. The restaurants were empty. You couldn't see people on the streets. You put on the television and all of a sudden the program would be interrupted and it would say the rebels, or whatever you want to call them, declared a state of seize, blah, blah, blah. In other words it was a situation which was really dramatic. And of course shootings were going on and it was a total disaster.

When I arrived and Majea Victor took over the situation improved very significantly. People were beginning to think that maybe he really wanted the country to come back to a democracy. Restaurants began to open again and there were people on the streets, etc. When the elections took place it was like the Fourth of July.

Q: Tell me, why did Guatemala go this way and El Salvador has remained until at least yesterday a major area of contention with the Nicaragua Sandinistas stirring up a lot of trouble?

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PIEDRA: I think there are several differences. First of all I think you cannot compare the Guatemalan army with the Salvadoran army. You can say whatever you want about the Guatemalan army, but they do have esprit de corps, they have a high morale, at least among the officers. I don't think you find that in the Salvadoran army. The Guatemalan army, and I am not justifying it, I think it is terrible, did wipe out the guerrilla movement. El Salvador never did that. Why, I don't know. Maybe because they were so corrupt. So in Guatemala from that point of view there is a significant difference. I am not saying this was justified. The ends do not justify the means. But they did act in such a way that the guerrilla movement ...don't forget that you couldn't go from Guatemala City to Antigua. The guerrillas would interfere along the main roads. In other words, it was a situation in which they occupied large portions of the country. The army was able to liquidate most of the guerrillas with tactics that...I want to repeat a hundred times that you and I would not agree with. Therefore when Majea Vitor came to power the country was in a totally different situation then it was before. So from that point of view there was greater stability in the sense that there were not guerrillas threatening to occupy cities, etc. as there was previously.

Q: Honduras was not an area where we were as concerned about as we were with El Salvador. Were the Nicaraguans trying to do anything there or were they...we are talking about the Sandinistas?

PIEDRA: Yes, they did. But you see by the time I got there the guerrillas were concentrated in the remote areas of the country so they did not constitute a threat to the major cities, communications, etc. They were more or less in isolated regions. But there were three or four areas in the country where they were operating. But they did not constitute such a burden to the cities. You could roam around Guatemala City with no problem.

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Q: Did you have to worry about your security? Could you talk about what it is like being an Ambassador...?

PIEDRA: That's another story. It was two different things. We are talking now of guerrillas. The political aspect of it. The threat almost disappeared in the cities but it existed in the mountains, etc. That is correct.

Now, common criminality. That, unfortunately, began to increase. You are asking why? There are different versions and different theories concerning that. But the fact still remains that from the point of view of common criminality it began to get worse and worse. Some people claim it is because the economic situation deteriorated at the beginning. I don't know if you can give credence to that or not because in reality it is true that it deteriorated in terms of the consequence but on the other hand it also improved because better economic measures were taken. Another reason and it may be more correct, I don't know, was that many of the old policemen were kicked out. There was a clean up. Many claim that many of these people who were before involved had the arms, etc. and became common criminals. Perhaps a weaker democratic government played a role as well.

Q: What did this mean for being an American Ambassador there?

PIEDRA: From our point of view and in all honesty I never felt fearful at all. We had very good security. Sometimes you wondered if we had too much security.

Q: Some years ago we had an Ambassador killed there, John Gordon Mein.

PIEDRA: Correct. I have to admit that I never felt in any way insecure although we had a lot of security at the Embassy. Personally I had two American bodyguards all the time next to me, plus about 10 Guatemalans. You know, advanced cars, etc. There was always the danger that something could happen, but as long as I was there nothing happened.

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Q: What were the main issues that you dealt with with the government? Were there any crises? Our Central American policy was at the forefront of our foreign policy during this time. Was Guatemala somewhat removed from this?

PIEDRA: Yes, Guatemala does not have a border with Nicaragua so from that point of view we were fortunate to be a little bit removed from that situation. We were, obviously, the stepping stone because we had a lot of Congressional Delegations. They were continuously coming. They would call one day and say that Senator so-and-so was coming on a tour of Central American and planned to stop over in Guatemala and wanted to see the President, the Foreign Minister, the Minister of Defense, etc. They would go from Guatemala to Nicaragua or Honduras. So we had a constant flow of people coming in and out. Now we in Guatemala, thank God, we were not involved.

Q: Because it came out later that there were an awful lot of things going on...part of it became known as the Iran-Contra Affair...

PIEDRA: We were not involved at all. As far as my knowledge is concerned we were not involved in the whole question of the Iran-Contra affair.

Q: Then you didn't feel pressure, let's say, from the National Security Council or from the Desk to do something about this or that?

PIEDRA: No. Because to avoid any possibility of people claiming to have instructions for the Embassy, the first thing I did was to say that any instruction that I receive at the Embassy had to come directly from the President through George Shultz, the Secretary of State, and Tony Martinez. I didn't care whether an instruction came from the NSC, the CIA, DOD, etc. (I repeat, none did), I wouldn't have accepted it. They would have had to send it through the Department of State.

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Q: It was very much a freewheeling time for that area where you had the NSC doing things that nobody else knew about and all that.

PIEDRA: I can assure you that as long as I was in Guatemala, nothing, unless I don't know about it, like that happened. I was very, very clear about this and everybody knew it. I remember I told George Shultz and Tony Martinez. I also discussed it with Elliott Abrams.

Q: From a policy consideration I would think there would be a sort of "Thank God, Guatemala is not a major problem."

PIEDRA: Wait a minute, I want to clarify. It is not a major problem, but it could be. Don't forget Guatemala is the number one country in Central America.

Q: How do you mean the number one country?

PIEDRA: In terms of resources, in terms of everything. Guatemala is the most advanced country. Guatemala City is the Paris of Central America, if you want to use the term. Guatemala has a very dynamic private sector, a very sophisticated one in fact. It is the most advanced in many ways of them all. So it is key. Now, fortunately for us it was not directly involved in all of these things. Indirectly, yes, because don't forget the guerrillas in Guatemala were backed by the Sandinistas and by Cuba.

Q: In looking up before this interview, there were problems when the new freely elected president came in, Serrano. He was working to institute land reforms, tax reforms, etc. but was backing off because he was really concerned about going too far because of the army. Was there an uneasy relationship or was that exaggerated?

PIEDRA: I don't really know. One of the things that Serrano did that some people criticize and some don't, was that he managed to win over the army. Now whether there was a quid pro quo there I really don't know. But everybody thought that the main opposition would be from the army. The army was always very suspicious of Serrano because he

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was much more leftist leaning and they were always fearful that he might turn towards Castro. Now the private sector was not in favor of him for the same reason. So when he came to power, people were anxious as to how he was going to react. For whatever reason, Serrano did not turn in that direction. He played both cards but he did not take a very leftist turn as many people expected. On the contrary, in many ways he maintained very good relations with the army, at least on the surface. Obviously there were some colonels who probably were not very happy for whatever reasons. He backed certain sections of the army and not others so there might have been some malcontents. But in all appearance things were calm in general.

Q: What were you as the Ambassador and by extension the United States government doing to help the situation?

PIEDRA: Well, don't forget that I was there only during the first 8 months of the Serrano regime. In the first 8 months, apart from the mentioned fears in certain sectors, as the months developed many of these fears declined. However, after I left, the thing started to deteriorate. By the time we left...you saw the results in the election. Serrano lost in a miserable way because people became frustrated.

Q: But it was still an election.

PIEDRA: Oh, yes. Serrano is a firm believer in democracy. I am sure of that. But in terms of his government, people were disillusioned.

Q: Did we have an AID program going in Guatemala?

PIEDRA: We did have one. I don't know how exactly it is operating.

Q: We are talking about the time you were there. What was the main thrust?

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PIEDRA: Basically, as I said before, it was very much directed towards the agricultural sector. We did water projects, showed farmers new techniques in how to grow things, etc. AID was performing a very good job in many ways.

Q: There has been a major influx of immigration from Central American countries and Guatemala is one of them. Guatemalans, among others, were seeking asylum in the United States. There wasn't the guerrilla war going on as in El Salvador but they were claiming sanctuary in churches, etc. What was the feeling at the Embassy towards this?

PIEDRA: You can not generalize. I am sure that some people in reality felt threatened. But on the other hand I also think that some people...very often you want to come to the United States and there are different ways of coming. To come to the United States sometimes is not very easy. Now the only way you can do it is by saying that you are a political refugee. I am not going to say that this was the normal thing. But in certain cases I think these two things can overlap.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia for five years. Yet there were people who left Yugoslavia claiming refugee status and actually they were really what you call an economic refugee.

PIEDRA: Yes, that is what I am trying to say. However, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the political and economic refugee.

Q: Did you have problems with members of the Catholic Church from the States?

PIEDRA: No. They would sometimes come with complaints about human rights and we would try to investigate it but they never created any problems for us.

Q: Well, let's say you get a complaint about human rights. After all one could say that if a policeman beats up a minority in Los Angeles, the Guatemalan Ambassador in Washington isn't going to send out someone to investigate. But what were we doing?

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PIEDRA: We would if it were an American citizen.

Q: But what if it wasn't an American citizen? You would get a report saying that there had been a killing in such and such a place; this would get in the papers; and then they would say what about this?

PIEDRA: Well, first of all we would try to find out the facts as they were...sometimes, as you know, these things are difficult. If there is something that is legitimate and we think it of serious consequences we would go to the Foreign Minister, or whoever it was, first and go through the proper channels. If necessary we would take it to the very top and say, "We are very concerned because we hear this is going on, and as you know we are opposed to any violations of human rights. We do not believe this is a question of getting involved with internal affairs, it is just a question of justice or humanitarianism."

For example, if we knew of a sudden kidnaping of somebody...one case when I was there had to do with trade unions. I went in to see the Foreign Minister and said, "This is terrible, how could it happen? Can you imagine the impact this will have abroad if something happens to this person?"

If they got the message they would try to solve the problem.

Q: I take it that there was understanding on the Guatemalan side of the government that when we made these protests it was not just meddling.

PIEDRA: It all depends on how you say these things. If you go there pounding on the table, that is ridiculous. But if you go and say, "Look, Emanuel, we just found out this. How could this be possible now that Guatemala is going on the right track? Now that Guatemala is doing the right thing. Now that the prestige of Guatemala is coming back after so many years of being considered the worse. Can't you investigate to see what is happening? I am sure you are not behind it." And let them do the rest. They know we are

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concerned. They know that we know about these things and we are putting it in general terms of "Hey, do this!" You don't say that, but they get the message.

Q: I take it that within that society you worked very hard to be on a first name basis?

PIEDRA: Yes. That is why I have always maintained that if you want to be a good diplomat the first thing you have to do is cultivate human relations. Because it is much easier for you to operate once you have this good personal relationship at the very beginning.

Q: What about Cuba? Did Cuba Embassy play much of a role?

PIEDRA: There was no Cuban Embassy in Guatemala.

Q: How about the Soviets?

PIEDRA: They don't have an embassy either. You see Guatemala did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet countries at all. They didn't have any communist country in Guatemala at the time.

Q: What about Mexico?

PIEDRA: Relations were not very good. Guatemala vis-a-vis Mexico is similar to what it used to be between Mexico and the United States. Because, don't forget, according to the Guatemalans the whole Chiapas region was originally Guatemala and the Mexicans took it away from them. So therefore there is the feeling of big brother on top who has abused Guatemala.

Now, by the way, it is to the credit of the Guatemalan government that it established good relations with the Mexican government. There were many implications of all this because it had to do with the whole question of guerrillas coming into Guatemala from Mexico. The guerrillas are according to Guatemalan sources, very often going into Mexico, staying there a while and then come back.

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Q: Did we stay out of the problems between Mexico and Guatemala?

PIEDRA: We didn't get involved because it wasn't that serious. I mean, it wasn't a question about war. It was just a sort of antagonism for historical reasons which was reflected now because of the suspicion that Mexico was protecting the guerrillas. The Mexican government, of course, has denied this saying that they can't patrol the border. Whatever the reason, the Guatemalans interpreted this as a sort of protection that the Mexican government was giving at the time to allow the guerrillas to linger there, etc. Therefore when there were some incidents...as you know there were some refugee camps which, after meetings, were pulled back a certain number of miles to avoid this problem.

Q: How about with Belize?

PIEDRA: That is a very touchy problem. But from what I have heard Savana [ph] now is going to change the whole thing.

Q: Guatemala had a claim there. Was this something that we got involved in or sort of left it to the British?

PIEDRA: We did and we didn't. We did in the sense that we wanted a peaceful solution. So from that point of view, yes. We did not get involved directly because it was a problem between Britain and Guatemala directly and had nothing to do with us. But, of course, we would not like a conflict there or a problem so we were always sympathetic to any kind of agreement which had been reached between both countries. Guatemala right now realizes that there is no possibility of their recovering Belize as part of Guatemala. But I do think they want rights towards the sea, etc.

Q: Did you and your Embassy get involved in the various peacekeeping efforts...El Salvador business dominated everything, the guerrilla war there. We were getting involved

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militarily, at least through assistance. Mexico and Venezuela and other Central American governments were in the Contradora...Was Guatemala involved?

PIEDRA: Well, yes they were involved. It was not a problem, but that is where diplomacy came in. Where did Guatemala stand in all this? Mexico wanted Guatemala always to be basically on their side. So from that point of view we were directly involved.

Q: I am sure you were getting cables all the time with instructions essentially to tell the Guatemalans this was how we wanted to see things and all. This is done to every post. On the Contradora position did you find the Guatemalans receptive, understanding of our concerns?

PIEDRA: I would say they were receptive. But the question here is that Guatemala wanted to follow a sort of independent, sort of neutral policy. We would have liked Guatemala to take more of a pro-US position in the whole Contradora process. Guatemala didn't want to antagonize either the US or Mexico so they took sort of a neutralist policy.

Q: At least they weren't against us.

PIEDRA: No, they were not against us. Sometimes they took actions that we would not have liked them to take.

Q: Were there any other major problems that I haven't touched on?

PIEDRA: Guatemala was not directly involved in the Sandinista problem. I am glad you mentioned the Contradora because, of course, that was an important issue that for a time did play a significant role, especially when we had the roving ambassadors. First we had Shlaudeman and then Philip Habib. They came to Guatemala a lot to keep in touch with the position of Guatemala vis-a-vis Nicaragua. But it was all on a diplomatic level. It was never on any other level except the diplomatic level.

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Q: What was your impression, you were on first name basis with many of the leaders there and all, of what was happening in Nicaragua with the Sandinistas, etc.?

PIEDRA: Well, privately, they were against the Sandinistas in general. But publicly they played it neutral. You see, one of the problems is that they were never sure of our attitude in the long run. In other words, they were never sure whether one day we would drop the Contras. They were not absolutely convinced that if they took our side...if we ever dropped the Contras and the Sandinistas were the ones who ruled, then they would find themselves in a very difficult position.

Q: A lot of Americans...

PIEDRA: They kept reminding me of what happened in Vietnam. And that is why they played this neutral attitude.

Q: How about the media? How did you find the press within Guatemala, and did you also get American reporters coming looking for horror stories? Was media a problem at all?

PIEDRA: I have to admit that as long as I was Ambassador in Guatemala we had no problem with the media except one case. Our security had decided that we should improve our security system around the Embassy in Guatemala and we had to close one of the streets, etc. That was used by one of the newspapers as a pretext to attack the Embassy for our policy in general. Saying that this is once again a demonstration of American imperialism, blah, blah, blah, and they think they can control everything, etc.

My personal opinion was that the attack was not so much an attack on us as it was a way to attack the mayor of Guatemala City whose rival in the mayoral elections had been the head of the newspaper involved. The mayor, of course, was the one who gave us authorization to do things. I think in order to hit the mayor he used us.

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In terms of foreign correspondence who came, yes, sometimes they tried to...but I generally would say no. Even 60 Minutes interviewed me for half an hour, but used only 2 minutes.

Q: 60 Minutes is sort of a muckraking TV show in which, if you appear on it, you are usually going to appear looking awful.

PIEDRA: They were asking me about human rights. I said to myself, "I bet you anything they are going to ask me and I am going to say the situation improved, etc., and right after that they will show somebody lying dead in the street." They did do that, but they didn't do it right after I spoke. With me personally, they didn't embarrass me.

Q: Was there any problem with drug smuggling or anything else at that time?

PIEDRA: Towards the end of my tour the drug problem began. There were rumors and talk, etc.

Q: So this was not on your priority list?

PIEDRA: It was beginning but at that time not a major problem.

Q: So you left in ...?

PIEDRA: August, 1987 and then I was appointed to the United Nations with Dick Walters.

Q: What was your job there?

PIEDRA: I went as Special Advisor to the General Assembly.

Q: What were your major concerns?

PIEDRA: I was dealing with the Ambassadors and so forth at the United Nations on Latin American affairs specifically. The basic idea was to get in touch with all the Latin

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Ambassadors, most of whom I knew, and see how they would vote in the General Assembly. It was sort of a lobbying operation. I would go back to Walters and say that this guy or that guy thinks this way or that way. That sort of thing.

This lasted for three months and then I was sent to Europe to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. I spent another three months commuting between Washington and Geneva.

After that I was appointed as a deputy for the Economic and Social Council, another conference in Geneva.

So I stayed at the UN with Walters until August, 1988.

Q: A full year.

PIEDRA: Yes, a full year. It was very interesting.

Q: What was your impression of the UN?

PIEDRA: After being at the OAS...the OAS seemed like a family reunion where you know everybody by their first name. The UN is totally different. It is not as personal. In my case I dealt primarily with Latin America so I had a more personal relationship, but in general it was much more impersonal. But it was interesting.

Q: I want to thank you very much. This has been fascinating.

End of interview